One of the most intriguing Jewish texts written in Greek during the Hellenistic-Roman period is the poetic work known as Pseudo-Orpheus.\(^1\) It has been preserved by Christian writers in various forms, beginning with Clement of Alexandria, although Eusebius reports that a version of the poem was quoted by Aristobulus, the Jewish philosopher who flourished in the mid-second century BCE.

It is something of an oversimplification to call it a "poetic work" since this would seem to imply a single composition. To be sure, in some cases it is preserved as a single, unified composition. A short version, consisting of some twenty-one lines, occurs in two works attributed to Pseudo-Justin, dated to the late third or early fourth century, while Eusebius preserves a longer version consisting of some forty-one verses. Accordingly, the poem is sometimes said to have been preserved in a longer and shorter recension. But even this veils the complexity of the textual tradition. Clement quotes some thirty-one lines from the poem, but rather than giving either the longer or shorter form of the poem as a unified composition, he cites scattered quotations. Taken as a whole, his quotations encompass most all of the shorter version found in Pseudo-Justin, but they also contain lines found in Eusebius’s longer version.

This obviously raises the question of Clement’s relationship to the so-called shorter and longer recension. Since his quotations include lines from the longer recension, does this mean that he has access to it? Or since his quotations also contain similarities with the shorter recension, does this mean that he also knew the poem in its shorter form? Or are his quotations so distinctive as to suggest his dependence on yet another version of the poem, a third recension?

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\(^1\) See my *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors*, vol. IV, *Orphica* (SBL Texts and Translations 40, Pseudepigrapha Series 14; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996)(= *FHJA* 4). The system of verse numbers used below in displaying the recensions is based on the most complete form of the poem, which appears in the Tübingen Theosophy. For a more detailed explanation, see *FHJA* 4.71 n. 1.
As one examines the poem in the various witnesses, one is struck by its fluidity. The long recension is not simply an extended version of the short recension, where verses have been added. Instead, there are substantial differences throughout the poem, ranging from grammatical to material changes. One gets the impression of a floating, poetic tradition with remarkable fluidity, where changes can be made to suit a wide variety of literary or historical settings.

Whether it is a Jewish composition through and through or whether it is a pagan composition that has been reworked and expanded by later Jewish redactors is a disputed question. In either case, the Jewish author(s) is writing in a distinctively Greek genre and has drawn heavily on the Greek epic tradition. The work reflects intimate familiarity with Homer and Hesiod, as well as other parts of the Greek poetic tradition.\(^2\)

What is especially remarkable is that the poem in its various forms retains its basic format: the mythical Greek singer and poet Orpheus instructing his son (or disciple) Musaeus about the one God—transcendent and inscrutable, enthroned in the heavens and presiding over the cosmos. A central feature of the poem is God’s elusive presence: for all his mystical insight, even Orpheus is unable to know the God he proclaims. “Even I do not see him,” Orpheus laments (v. 21). The aura of mystery is reflected in the description of God: invisible behind the clouds, unseen, yet all-seeing. And the content is reinforced by the form: the opening line is a stock, formulaic address, probably from a mystery initiation rite where the initiates are invited inside to hear the proclamation while the uninitiated are excluded.

Naturally, what piqued the interest of the Jewish community in (Ptolemaic) Alexandria, or perhaps some unknown Alexandrian Jewish scholar, was the poem’s focal interest in the “one God” who is “self-generated,” and of whom it could be said that “all things are brought

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